DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 271 CG 020 963

AUTHOR Sedlacek, William E.; Roper, Larry D.
TITLE Student Personnel Professionals in Academic Roles: A Multicultural Example. Research Report #2-88.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.
REPORT NO RR-2-80
PUB DATE Feb 88
NOTE 15p.
AVAILABLE FROM University of Maryland, Counseling Center, College Park, MD.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Instruction; Higher Education; *Role Perception; *Student Personnel Services; Student Personnel Workers; Teaching (Occupation)

ABSTRACT

This document examines the relationship between the student affairs and academic functions in higher education and presents three major reasons why student affairs personnel should be involved in academic functions: (1) to contribute to the academic mission and life of the campus; (2) to show that student affairs operates from a body of knowledge which has rigor; and (3) to further contribute to the growth and development of students. Teaching courses is described as one area where student affairs staff directly contribute to the academic mission. While there are many subject areas that could be taught by student affairs personnel, some particularly relevant ones are considered, such as courses dealing with college students, leadership, training, community development, higher education, and finance and administration. This report elaborates and illustrates the role of student affairs personnel in academic functions by discussing the teaching of a course entitled "Education and Racism." It concludes that there are unique contributions that can be made by student affairs personnel that directly affect academic functions which are not being made by others on campus, asserting that an attempt should be made to redefine and develop the academic role for student affairs staff and calling for a future conference on the topic. (Author/NB)

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Student Personnel Professionals in Academic Roles: A Multicultural Example

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There are three major reasons why student affairs personnel should be involved in academic functions: (1) to contribute to the academic mission and life of the campus, (2) to show that student affairs operates from a body of knowledge which has rigor, (3) to further contribute to the growth and development of students. These points are elaborated and illustrated through the teaching of a course entitled "Education and Racism." There are unique contributions that can be made by student affairs personnel that directly affect academic functions that are not being made by others on campus. An attempt should be made to redefine and develop the academic role for student affairs staff and a call for a future conference on the topic is made.

The relationship between the student affairs and academic functions in higher education appears to be little understood, and complex from either side. Student affairs professionals often ignore academic functions or approach them with role conflicts and anxiety. Faculty and academic administrators also tend to ignore student affairs, or fail to see any significant role student affairs can play in academic areas.

The purpose of this article will be to articulate several points which may serve to clarify matters, and provide a context for student affairs to become more involved in academic affairs. The points will be elaborated through the discussion and evaluation of a course entitled "Racism and Education".

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Contribution to the Academic Mission

Nearly all institutions have as their major goal the impartation of knowledge and intellectual development of students. All other goals tend to be secondary. If student affairs professionals wish to contribute to this mainstream activity, they must define their functions, at least in part, in academic terms and particpate in the educational processes of higher education (Nash & Saurman, 1982). Additionally Jones (1982) has suggested that student affairs professionals should

develop teaching and research skills in order for them to move into an equal plane with faculty.

One direct to attempt to link student affairs functions to academic functions has been demonstrated by Sedlacek (1982). He has shown that students were able to translate student affairs experience in areas such as seeing a counselor or living in a residence hall, into equivalent academic credits. For example, students equated their sessions with a counselor as equivalent to about three credits, and a year in a residence hall as worth about 6 credits, in terms of benefit to them. Such a procedure allows for student affairs professionals to present what they do in academic terms, understandable to all members of the campus community.

Teaching courses is one area where student affairs staff directly contribute to the academic mission (Hanson, 1983). While there are many subject areas that could be taught by student affairs personnel, there are some that are particularly relevant, and perhaps unique to student affairs. Courses dealing with college students, leadership, training, community development, higher education, finance and administration are but a few examples.

Higher education should respond to individual and societal needs. As such, students should be confronted with the realities of the environment, investigation of the human condition and they should be exposed to the ideals that people have striven toward throughout history.

Integrative courses, as opposed to distributive studies and advanced learning skills courses (math and language skills), are designed to give students the opportunity to understand the world's changing environment and the place of the individual within it. The purpose of these courses is to give the student an understanding of some broad social problem (Carnegie Foundation, 1977). In upper-division integrative studies courses students should confront moral and ethical dilemmas that they will confront in their lives (Martin, 1982).

Student personnel professionals must draw upon relevant information from the areas of psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, literature and economics in order to bring a needed scholarly base to the courses they teach (Nash & Saurman, 1982). For instance, content areas that might be explored in a racism course include cognitive psychology, behavior modification, experiential training, cultural awareness and psychological attribution (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986), in addition to information directly concerning racism (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

The course on racism serving as the background for this article provides an illustration of an area where input from student personnel specialists appears relevant. The course deals directly with problems affecting students and education in practical ways, aimed at not only understanding racism, but how we might go about eliminating it on a campus.

The integration of colleges and universities created a challenge for higher education that included managing an interracial learning environment and responding to negative racial attitudes that students possess and/or exhibit. The rise in racist activities on college campuses has led to many questions concerning the attitudes that students have toward people of different races. Of particular importance is how students view people from other races, as well as how they feel that they are perceived by members of other races (Patterson, Sedlacek, & Perry, 1984). Teaching techniques employed included group processing, community projects and student involvement in classroom activities. While not unique to student affairs, these are techniques which are at the heart of much student personnel work. Who should be able to do them better than student service professionals?

Aside from directly teaching courses it is important that student affairs professionals assist faculty in understanding student needs and goals. Part of this role may involve helping faculty to realize that students need to see some connection between their lives, on and off campus, and what happens in the classroom (Nash & Saurman, 1982). Discussing these issues with faculty through orientation and training programs, seminars and research reports and other writing, are but a few ways this could be accomplished.

Student Affairs Operates from a Body of Knowledge

A regular criticism of student affairs work is that it is a "seat of the pants", crisis-oriented collection of services with

little to suggest it is a profession. To counter this stereotype, both within and outside student affairs, it is important to take every opportunity to shape and develop courses and curricula which define a body of knowledge with a rigorous base.

Originally the racism course was dismissed as "pop sociology" by an academic dean in the early 1970's. However, research supporting the point that many students held negative attitudes toward other races, that students were interested in taking the course and that teachers were available to teach it, resulted in the course initially being offered as a "special topics" course (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973). Through evaluation and promotion of the course and its content, it became an elective with a regular course number in 1976, and in 1985 became a course that fulfills a university advanced studies requirement . The university course catalog states that advanced studies courses are expected to focus on the application of knowledge from one or more disciplines to the study of an important human problem.

The course supports the development of a number of skills, some of them falling in areas that are traditionally assigned to faculty (e.g., cognitive) and others falling in areas that are traditionally assigned to student affairs staff (e.g., interpersonal). The skills focused on in the course are: interpersonal and problem-solving skills (group projects); verbal skills (debates and presentations); social observation skills and analytical skills (racism logs); and writing and research skills

(papers). Readings are included from a wide range of disciplines, while teaching techniques employ key student development concepts in the design and facilitation of in-class activities.

The course was initiated, developed and taught by a student affairs professional who was not formally affiliated with the department offering the course. The research generated by interest in the course and which supports the course content was recently summarized and published (Sedlacek, 1987). That student affairs staff have been so central to this course and its evaluation is a point regularly noted by both academic and student affairs staff on that campus.

Growth and Development of Students

Teaching courses can contribute directly to the basic goal of student affairs work: student development. At a time when many are criticizing curricula for shortcomings in this area, student affairs can aid its own mission and help academic units in theirs as well.

Most student affairs practicioners believe that students should learn more than facts in the classroom. Part of that belief is that students should engage in experiences that will help them to formulate humane value systems, integrate a world view and develop a broader view of self and others. In order to create this type of developmental atmosphere in the classroom, the instructor should provide and allow for: (a) diversity of viewpoint and practice at relativistic thinking; (b) experiential modes of learning; (c) structure; and (d) a personal atmosphere

(Widick & Simpson, 1978).

Several outcomes of the racism course are related to student affairs goals: (1) an appreciation of differences among students, (2) direct problem solving in such areas as roommate selection, student clubs and organizations, and rights and responsibilities in a community.

The course vividly illustrates that not all students have the same understanding of the topic at the beginning, middle or end of the course. Feelings, perceptions and understandings evolve in many directions depending on race, sex and experience. Several typical developmental profiles emerge.

For instance, some black students initially feel they understand racism but in mid-course go through a period of self-doubt and eventually renewed commitment to eliminating racism. A common pattern for white students is to start the course by not seeing yourself as a part of or being affected by racism, and then to slowly realize how they, their friends, family, and ancestors are involved, and to finish the course confused with many questions unanswered. Another pattern followed by some minority students is to initially deny the existence of racism and eventually feel it is so pervasive that they now must reassess their basic relationships. The course structure allows for student growth at different rates.

These and other outcomes are seen as developmental for students in that they move the student along many dimensions which increase self-understanding (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

These different outcomes for different groups are also an important discussion point for academic colleagues who are less likely to think in such terms. Such discussions may help faculty to understand development dynamics in the courses they teach.

Specific problems such as roommate selection and acceptance of students in different clubs and organizations are dealt with directly in course content.

For example, at the beginning of the course nearly 75% of the students identified at least one group that they would not accept as roommates or members of their club or organization. By the end of the class this number was reduced to less than 50%.

Through exercises, class discussion and group projects, students deal with practical student affairs issues and seek to resolve them. Training programs to increase residence hall staff abilities to handle multicultural issues, changes in rushing procedures, and reducing bias in admissions policies are all example of procedures adopted by the campus which were initiated by students as part of the course. A course can be viewed by a student affairs professional as a unique way to achieve some student affairs goals that otherwise would be difficult to accomplish.

Summary and Conclusions

The attempt has been made here to offer some reasons why student affairs professional should be involved in academic functions in higher education: (1) to contribute to the academic mission and life of the campus, (2) to show that student affairs

operates from a body of knowledge which has rigor, (3) to further contribute to the growth and development of students. Each point was elaborated and discussed in the context of relevant literature.

It has been suggested that student affairs is a profession in need of a philosophy (Stamatakos & Rogers, 1984).

We feel that student affairs should adopt a philosophy that is based on its contribution to the academic function in higher education. There are unique contributions that could be made by student affairs personnel that directly affect academic functions that are not currently being made by others on the campus. We feel an attempt should be made on all campuses to refine and develop the academic role for student affairs staff and call for a future national annual convention to reflect this theme.*

*Individuals interested in more details about the course discussed here are invited to write the senior author.

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